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In Dubious Battle

AT HOME ABROAD

By Anthony Lewis

Before he became President, Richard Nixon described in "Six Crises" the struggle through which he puts himself in times of stress. At critical moments before and since, he has inadvertently given more revealing public glimpses of his private emotions. What is it that he has revealed?

"Now that all the members of the press are so delighted that I have lost . . ." so he addressed the press after losing the race for Governor of California in 1962, the occasion best known for his remark: "You won't have Nixon to kick around any more, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference."

There were other things in that 1962 statement than the remembered comments on the press. Mr. Nixon said President Kennedy should get rid of advisers "who opposed atomic tests, who want him to admit Red China to the U.N., all of the woolly heads around him." He said of the man who had just beaten him, Edmund G. Brown:

"I believe Governor Brown has a heart, even though he believes I do not. I believe he is a good American, even though he feels I am not."

Traces of the old aggressiveness can be seen in the diversionary attack on "woolly heads," along with what has to be a kind of paranoia about the press. But the more significant theme in that 1962 press conference was something else: self-pity.

Most people feel sorry for themselves at times, and it is never an attractive trait. But even a decade later it is embarrassing to read the words of a public man that so painfully displays the hurt, the defensiveness, the resentments of self-pity.

In four and one-half years as President, Mr. Nixon has mostly maintained a public demeanor of calm and control—in part, perhaps, by being so little in public. But there have been times when he let the inner emotions show.

One notable occasion was the Cambodian "incursion" in April, 1970, with the violent public reaction it produced. After attending a Pentagon briefing, the President chatted with two officials and suddenly spoke his resentments aloud:

"You see these bums, you know, blowing up the campuses. Listen, the boys that are on the college campuses today are the luckiest people in the world, going to the greatest universities, and there they are burning up the books, storming around about this issue. You name it. Get rid of the war, there will be another one."

In his television speech announcin the incursion, Mr. Nixon dwelt on hi self. Some thought he would be hu politically, he said, but "I would rath be a one-term President and do wh I believe was right than to be a tw term President at the cost of seein America become a second-class pow and to see this nation accept the fir defeat in its proud 190-year history.

That same curious personalizatio appeared in other Nixon war speeche along with the argument of America power and the need to avoid "humi ation." He said more than once th he could have blamed the war on hi predecessors and pulled out, but h had chosen the harder course—as the test of Richard Nixon were as important as the trauma of Indochin

There was a similar strain in th rambling speech the President mad to his staff when he got out of th hospital last month. He had bee warned about risking his health, h said, but "the health of a man is ne nearly as important as the health o the nation and the health of th world." And then, adopting the roya "we," he closed by saying: "What w were elected to do, we are going t do, and let others wallow in Wate gate, we are going to do our job."

There is a kind of fantasized hero ism in all this: the lonely figure figh ing on for what is right despite th press, the bums, all the enemies out side, even ill health. The stilted refer ences to himself, finally as we, mak it the more striking.

Genuine heroes do not talk abou their heroism, and genuine politica leaders do not try to communicate i terms of their status. When Lincol wrote to the mother of a Civil War soldier, he did not call attention t his troubles as President, he spoke a one human being to another.

But Lincoln knew what was inside himself, so he did not need the con stant reassurance of outside approva and the symbols of power. That i another way of saying that he ha true humility, the essential ingredien of political confidence and dignity.

It must be that Richard Nixon look to the externals because he has n confidence in what lies within. That i a harsh thing to say, but he is Presi dent, and his character infects hi Administration. The Presidency ough to have ennobled him, as it has s many others. But he remains a hollow man aware of his own hollowness